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# Olive Schreiner, War and Pacifism

Lis Stanley, University of Edinburgh

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## Abstract

Three sets of Schreiner materials are read in relation to each other. These are the more than 230 letters and postcards to her favourite niece Lyndall Schreiner, known in the family as Dot, only recently available; her wartime-published open letters, essays and an allegory; and her unfinished and recently published treatise on war, conscientious objection and pacifism, *The Dawn of Civilisation*. These enable the connections between her personal relationships, activities and network connections regarding war and pacifism, and her writing, to be explored. Together, they demonstrates Schreiner's high profile place in contemporary social and political movements, and the radicalism of her analysis of war and violence in *The Dawn of Civilisation* compared with *Woman and Labour*.

## Introduction: Schreiner on War and Peace

The work of South African writer, political commentator and social theorist Olive Schreiner has received much scholarly attention since publication of First and Scott's ground-breaking *Olive Schreiner* (including Berkman, *Healing Imagination*; McClintock, *Imperial Leather*; Burdett, *Progress of Feminism*; Stanley, *Imperialism*; Schoeman, *Olive Schreiner, Only an Anguish*; Burdett, *Olive Schreiner*; Stanley and Salter, *World's Great Question*). Recently there has been attention to new dimensions of Schreiner's writing, as with Driver's *Olive*

*Schreiner's Poetics of Plants*, as a way of revisioning her published work. There has also been a return to manuscript sources, including publishing Schreiner's letters (*Olive Schreiner Letters Online*), and producing a major new edition of *From Man to Man* (Driver, "Introduction"). And occasionally previously unknown material has entered the public domain, including new letters, and previously unknown shorter writings (Stanley, *Olive Schreiner's The Dawn*: 87-118).

In what follows, some new primary sources, returning to the manuscripts and revisioning Schreiner's work are discussed and, given their content, what they contribute to re-thinking Schreiner's ideas about war and pacifism is explored. Many previously unknown Schreiner letters and postcards to her favourite niece Lyndall Schreiner, known as Dot, have become available;<sup>1</sup> Schreiner's open letters, essays and allegories written over the period of the Great War have been collected and published; and the manuscripts of her unfinished treatise on war, conscientious objection and pacifism, *The Dawn of Civilisation*, has been edited in a completed version (both in Stanley, *Olive Schreiner's The Dawn*). Together, these sources throw new light on interconnections between Schreiner's personal relationships, writing, feminism and pacifism. This is not to take a biographical approach, but one concerned with her social and political thinking, her involvements in political movements and organisations, and the relationship between them. The result indicates that Schreiner's place in contemporary thinking and linked organisations concerning war and pacifism was higher profile than previously appreciated, with reverberations for reappraising her work overall as well as during the Great War period.

## **Intellectual and Political Context**

Olive Schreiner was a life-long opponent not just of war but anything that contributed to warfare, including the smaller violences of everyday life. In one of the writings discussed later, she dates this to a childhood epiphany when she experienced a flash of insight about violence and suffering in human life. This put her at odds with her Old Testament-influenced missionary parents, although she resolutely lived out the principles involved. It also connects with her describing herself, in a letter discussed later, as a problem girl in being not so much rebellious as awkwardly unable to fit in. This is a helpful way of thinking about the political and ethical views Schreiner held, which encompassed more than war and peace, important though these are, because providing a politics and ethics of social life that cut across the grain of then prevailing conventions. Both her work and her relationships were impacted by strong moral and ethical convictions from an early age, and which later became central to her feminism, socialism and also her writing (Berkman, *Healing Imagination*; Stanley, *Imperialism*; Stanley and Salter, *World's Great Question*). Describing this as even absolute pacifism does not fully capture the part played by Schreiner's disavowal of all forms of violence in all aspects of life, and it was this that later led many people, from Gandhi to her brother Will Schreiner to friends Emily Hobhouse and Edward Carpenter, to see her as inflexible in not softening her principles.<sup>2</sup>

The term problem girl appears in Schreiner's November 1912 letter to her niece, Dot Schreiner, writing that "You problem girls are so precious to my soul. I understand you so. I was a problem girl all by myself 30 years ago".<sup>3</sup> This is part of a number of exchanges between them about women's suffrage, education and what kind of occupations would or could be open to women, things which were preoccupying Dot and friends. Similar concerns had underpinned Schreiner's remove to Europe thirty years before, including wanting to be financially independent, limitations on white women in South Africa of the day, the role of

her writing, and that both literally and figuratively she felt she did not fit in. This sense of being at odds with the mainstream continued to mark her relationships, ironically including later on with Dot, and surfaced in a particularly marked way in relation to war and violence. A letter in the later stages of the Great War to another niece, Wynnie Hemming, indicates something of this in writing that “Of course I am a pacifist & opposed to all war & that divides one from every one here [London] now”.<sup>4</sup>

Olive Schreiner had left South Africa in later 1913 to seek treatment for her heart problems. Caught in Germany then the Netherlands as war was declared and leaving on one of the last ships to leave without danger, she then lived in Britain until returning to South Africa in later 1920. Her letters to Dot continued during and after the Great War. However, the sense of growing political differences results in the later letters having a very different feel from pre-war ones. They commence with a strong sense of shared concerns, while later communications are largely of a rather bland staying in touch kind, though occasionally there are small eruptions, wherein war, violence, pacifism and Schreiner’s writing about this precipitously enter the frame. Such things read as almost forced out of the depths of the silence Schreiner tried to maintain with loved people who supported the war, and they are the focus of discussion in the “Hating violence in all its form” section of this article.

Surrounded in Britain by people who fully supported the war, or did so reluctantly, or supported a humanitarian involvement, and feeling at odds with them all, Schreiner was of course not alone in her pacifist convictions. There was a large, very active anti-war movement with key organisations including the Union of Democratic Control (UDC), the No-Conscription Fellowship (NCF) and the strongly feminist Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), and a range of positions with regards to humanitarianism and pacifism (Robbins, *Abolition of War*; Kennedy, *Hound of Conscience*; Foster, *Women for All*

*Seasons*; Brown, *Truest Form*; Olmstead, *Reconsidering Peace*). They had strong internationalist principles and networks that operated across the belligerent countries. Olive Schreiner was involved, to different extents and at different times, with them all (Stanley, *Olive Schreiner's The Dawn*). Her strongest allegiances were with the conscientious-objection of the men resisting conscription represented by the NCF, and the pacifism shared with many members of the WILPF, which included some of her closest friends and associates.

It is also clear that the anti-war movement and its absolute pacifist elements provided Schreiner not only with the fellowship of like-minds, but also publication possibilities and an audience largely sympathetic to her views. Most of her anti-war writings were published in this context, although she did try (mainly unsuccessfully) to reach wider audiences. These connections in the anti-war movement and the shorter writings she produced are the focus of the "It was the old, old story" section of the discussion.

Schreiner experienced debilitating ill-health because of asthma and an inherited family heart condition, but still managed to maintain a wide network of connections and produce a number of shorter writings over much of the war period. There was also something larger she was working on, a projected book, *The Dawn of Civilisation*. This was begun in a burst of energy in later 1914 soon after the war started, and continued during two recuperative periods spent with friends in Llandrindod Wells in July-October 1915 and July-September 1916 when her health improved, tracked across her letters. But London, to which Schreiner returned over winter months, was often fog-bound and very polluted, including from the perpetual bombing in northern France. Ill-health returned and her energies drained away; and while she continued working on the draft, it was never

completed. Its contents are nonetheless important, because they represent a major change in her analysis of warfare and the origins of violence.

In Schreiner's earlier *Woman and Labour*, war is seen as the result of men's divorce from the social caring aspects of life, with its solution being that they should become as involved in such things as women; and relatedly, it sees human nature as malleable and capable of change even in the shorter run. This changed in *The Dawn of Civilisation*. Instead this sees war as the product of ingrained violence, and violence as existing at an unchanged deep-seated level of human nature for women and men equally, although taking differently gendered forms. It treats human nature as more animalistic and intractable, and sees the same urge to violence motivating both men and women. Correspondingly, its analysis of solutions is far less optimistic, identifying only what is invoked as the far future as the point at which human nature will have been reconfigured sufficiently for violence no longer to exist. It is the focus of discussion in the "These scattered thoughts" section.

#### **"Hating violence in all its forms"<sup>5</sup>**

There are 238 letters and postcards by Olive Schreiner to Lyndall (Dot) Schreiner, the eldest daughter of her youngest brother, the politician and lawyer Will Schreiner and his wife Fan.<sup>6</sup> The first is dated late January 1908 and the last in later November 1920, a week or two before Schreiner died. Dot was Schreiner's favourite niece, and to a friend, Mary Drew, in 1913 she wrote that she was "the very apple of my eye".<sup>7</sup> After a stellar career as a law student and the first woman called to the South African Bar, the Great War led Dot to nursing just behind the front-line of fighting in France, then to become a Wren administrator in a high-level naval office. In 1919 she married the former army officer turned colonial official in Tanganyika, William Thornton Huband (known as Tommy) Gregg.

The earlier communications convey shared concerns, including women's suffrage, Dot's interest in the law and following in her father's footsteps, and also the possibility she might instead throw over the traces and become an actor or writer. Olive Schreiner destroyed letters she received because she moved around so much, therefore only her side remains, making it difficult to gauge whether this is her own enthusiasms being expressed or is a response to Dot's. However, what is clear is that the earlier and later letters are very different, for the shared concerns in the earlier ones become largely a staying in touch blandness. Thinking from this about what the other side is likely to have been like (Halldorsdottir, "Silence"), Dot became more distant and less responsive because involved in her own very different life and the momentous events she was living through, reinforced by increasingly divergent views. But whatever the reason, over time the letters witness Schreiner repeatedly appealing for a response even if perfunctory.

Over the period of the correspondence, Schreiner's health declined, she left South Africa in 1913 seeking treatment for her heart problem, after a brief renaissance in 1914/15 her health continued to decline, a slow retreat from the world of events occurred, although she continued reading and thinking about political and related matters. Over the same period, Dot Schreiner was a student at Newnham College Cambridge, became active in suffrage politics in London and South Africa, read for the bar, nursed at the front-line, wrote a book, ran a naval office, married a senior colonial official, had a baby. The growing differences were not just regarding these outward signs, but concerned their views about war, pacifism, colonialism, political suffrage and women's work. While it seems likely that differences would have emerged anyway, the occurrence of the war precipitated clashes, or near-clashes, of opinion because sharpening views on both sides. That this was a serious matter is shown, for instance, in Schreiner writing to a friend that she could not talk as she



wanted when visiting her brother Will (who in 1915 became South African High Commissioner in London) because of Dot's views.<sup>8</sup>

However, long before the war, Schreiner had become skilled in being silent about her views when she became aware of sharp differences of principle with people she otherwise felt close to: her strategy from young womanhood on was to express her own views, but then not otherwise engage (Stanley, *Imperialism*). Regarding the correspondence with Dot, it is the combination of silence and the need to speak out that gives it a characteristic tone, whereby the routine or anodyne is sometimes punctuated by passages raising differences expressed in more emotive language. On a number of occasions the need to speak out like this led Schreiner to express things she knew Dot would disagree with. But what precipitated her breaking an otherwise strategic silence?

Before Olive Schreiner left South Africa at the end of 1913, she had grounds for thinking there was considerable unity in their views about political matters, including but not confined to women's suffrage. For instance, the introduction by the Botha/Smuts government of a Defence Act setting up a reserve military force is criticised in a 1912 letter because it would "fill the country with blood one of these days – & people can't see it!"<sup>9</sup> It conjures up the bitterness of fighting during the South African War (1899-1902), which Dot had first-hand knowledge of because of violent attacks on her father, Prime Minister when the war started. In November 1912 it was followed by the problem girl letter referred to earlier, which strongly associates Schreiner with her niece and friends in departing from the conventions.<sup>10</sup> Then in July 1914 from a health resort in Bad Nauheim in Germany, Schreiner wrote graphically about witnessing an orchestrated police attack on demonstrating Women's Social and Political Union [WSPU] members in London, with the tacit assumption Dot would share her non-militancy on suffrage matters, and also appreciate why this

violence had led her to modify her stance.<sup>11</sup> Soon after this, having been in Berlin just as war was declared, she went to Amsterdam, where she wrote to Dot from the home of a friend, Aletta Jacobs. This similarly indicates her assumption of shared views: “By the time this reaches you you will know whether our worst fears have been realized & the Universal War has broken out”.<sup>12</sup> “Our” does much work here, although later Schreiner came to realise this “our” with shared fears did not exist, and her ideas about universal war is returned to later.

When Dot with sister Ursula and mother Fan left to South Africa to join Will Schreiner when he became High Commissioner, however, a restrained tone and the absence of political comment prevailed. But that there *was* disagreement is conveyed in a letter, undated but from content written in February/March 1916 when Schreiner was house-sitting for some absent pacifist friends. Sending Dot something she had written, she commented, “no doubt you [have] seen [it]. You won’t agree with my out look. But that is how some of us do feel. We may be wrong - but so it is with us”.<sup>13</sup> What is striking here is the implication she was imparting something new to Dot, that although “no doubt” Dot had read it (via her father), they had not communicated about this previously, although at that time meeting regularly. “Us” is notable here, because “my”, “us” and “we” are juxtaposed to “you”, with the contrast with the “us” of her earlier letter about the WSPU quite stark.

Small eruptions of difficult subjects continue across 1916 and 1917. More momentously, an undated letter, but from content written in later 1917/early 1918 around the point Dot left nursing and joined the Wrens, throws important light on Schreiner’s thinking at that point:

I feel you are passing through a great crisis in your life mentally [...] I have passed through several: One was during the first two years of the war here I have always loved humanity so & had much faith in human nature, & it

seemed to me my faith in it was going to die. I have lived through it now – only I know all that I hoped for will be in 4 thousand years time – but it will come.<sup>14</sup>

This was written when many young South African men who flocked to London to enlist and Schreiner became friendly with had been killed in the trenches, the sound of bombing in France could be heard in London, and the daily published lists of those missing or dead became immensely longer. It writes of a “great crisis”, ostensibly Dot’s but actually Schreiner’s, of despair about humanity regarding war, but she had “lived through it” to reach the conviction that “all that I hoped for” would eventually come about – “it will come”. The crisis in question is not made explicit in any letters, but there are signs of it in the writing referred to in the February/March 1916 “You won’t agree” letter, with this discussed more fully in the following section.

Another sudden puncturing of the silence appears in a letter, not dated but from content written in late 1919, soon after Dot’s marriage and move to Tanganyika in October that year:

I keep picturing you settling down in your own home [...] I suppose all the Germans have been turned out & you wouldn’t have anything to do with the wild & wicked Huns if there were any. Here people are beginning to hate the Russians & the French & the Belgians & Americans as much as we hate the Germans. We hate each other. I don’t know where people get so much hatred from – I would run dry. I can do much more loving than hating<sup>15</sup>

Phrasing here, particularly the shifting meaning of “we”, “us”, “people” and “you”, indicates that the hatred commented on is both a general phenomenon and also marks Dot’s feelings about Germans. It is parodied in the phrase “wild & wicked Huns” and is followed with

multiple appearances of “hate”, “hatred” and “hating”. “People” who have so much hatred tacitly encompasses Dot.

This letter was written after the formal end of the Great War, but when its consequences were still being powerfully experienced across Europe. In particular it emphasises that the feelings war had unleashed were continuing to mark people’s and countries’ behaviours and shape the course of things. This sense of an aftermath was not merely symbolic, for war-related events continued to unfold, in the colonial context in which Dot was then living, in shortages of food and other goods in Europe, and in fraught relationships between people in these different spheres. It also surfaces in a sharp way in a January 1920 letter, which begins by referring to colonialism and the April 1919 massacre in Amritsar, and observes that Dot’s husband might have been posted there or other places where uprisings against colonial rule were occurring. A determined opponent of imperialism, Schreiner implies but does not openly state that Dot and husband were fully part of the imperial project. The letter continues by expressing Schreiner’s feelings about war and that, while throwing off absolute rule by the Kaiser in Germany and the Czar in Russia was to be welcomed, nothing else of benefit had come out of it, while conditions were continuing to worsen:

Oh Dot, I do hate war so, I hate it more & more every day I live. What has come of all the fighting? Germany has got rid of the Kaiser (which is a good thing) & Russia has got rid of the Czar which is even better – but there’s not much cakes & ale for any of us now. You don’t know how awful conditions are here right now. Food getting worse & worse & every thing dearer<sup>16</sup>

The letter ends on a personal note: Dot rarely replied to letters and had entered colonial life with a husband whose views were opposed to Schreiner's. This was the factor that propelled a strong comment which brings together the political and the interpersonal:

I would send my love to your husband – I do love him because he makes you so happy – but I'm afraid he wouldn't want the love of a person who had never been in church since she was fifteen & who was a pasifist! [sic]<sup>17</sup>

As well as expressing upset about rarely hearing from her niece, this letter also conveys that for Schreiner the economic, social and personal consequences of the war reinforced each other. It is also one of few occasions where Schreiner uses the word pacifist, first appearing in a March 1916 letter.<sup>18</sup>

Overall, Olive Schreiner's letters to her niece evidence a growing distance between them on a range of political topics but particularly war and pacifism. This might have occurred anyway, as Dot entered full adulthood and matured her own plans rather than being swayed by the enthusiasms of her elders. However, the long terrible war brought differences in views and principles into sharp relief. Schreiner's well-established mode of conduct involved recognising and acknowledging the existence of differences, but then not discussing them further, as a way of maintaining close relationships when even profound differences existed. However, her letters to Dot show there were times when events, interpersonal and societal, led her to break this silence, when the intensity of her feelings about war and the corrosive hatred involved became emmeshed with more personal matters.

The letters to Dot do not mention Schreiner's continuing attempts write analytically about war apart from once, as already noted. But such mentions *do* occur in other letters,

and clearly the prevailing silence about her writing here was because it was so closely linked with her pacifism.

**“It was the old, old story – death and destruction”<sup>19</sup>**

Olive Schreiner’s letters more generally show that by later 1914 her connections and practical involvements in anti-war activities and groups had mushroomed. Immediately the war began, she became convinced both that the mooted League of Nations, not then yet in existence, would fail, and that in forty or so years in the future there would be worse conflagration.<sup>20</sup> She swiftly became active in networking with key figures in the anti-war movement, including Norman Angell, Vernon Lee, Catherine Marshall, Bertrand Russell and George Bernard Shaw among others, as well as with friends who became involved in it, sometimes through her introductions, including Frederick Pethick-Lawrence, John Hobson, Isabella Ford and Israel Zangwill.<sup>21</sup>

Schreiner’s particular concern was supporting the NCF because it defended men facing punitive tribunals because they were absolute conscientious objectors. However, all the peace organisations at points worked together and a June 1915 conference produced a joint manifesto, as discussed later. She was invited to give her name to this, with her signed copy on archival record. She was also among the women in May 1915 denied passports (then recently introduced) to enable them to attend the international feminist conference in The Hague which eventuated in foundation of the WILPF, while she numbered key figures in its ranks including Jane Addams, Aletta Jacobs and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence as her friends.<sup>22</sup>

However, regarding writing for publication, the record is scantier, most likely pointing to Schreiner’s increasing heart problems, which led to in effect the cessation of

new writing by the end of 1916, although she continued working on *The Dawn of Civilisation* draft after this. A handful of shorter writings were also finalised, in the form of open letters, manifestoes and an allegory.<sup>23</sup> All were penned as public documents, and all appeared in the public domain though not always as publications in the usual sense, as with for example the manifestoes. Overall, the arguments in these fragmentary pieces add up to something consistent. As well as content, their form and how they appeared in the public domain are also important in piecing together Schreiner's standing in the social and political context of anti-militarism and peace activism of the day.

"Letter to a peace meeting" is addressed to a meeting in March 1915 in London held under the auspices of the UDC, although participated in by other people and organisations. (Stanley, *Olive Schreiner's The Dawn*: 89-93). Schreiner was invited to speak but instead wrote this open letter to be read out. However, who invited her is not known and unfortunately there are no surviving UDC files for this period. She had become friendly with Norman Angell and a number of social as well as political meetings between them are documented, so this may have been a source. Certainly that she was invited to speak, and an open letter was read out on her behalf, indicates her importance at that point and that she was sufficiently well-connected to receive such invitations.

The open letter's message is perhaps unexpected in the midst of the Great War. Schreiner looks beyond the war to a future peace and what form it would take. Enmity she argues has to be given up; feelings of resentment that give rise to future wars need to be prevented; and this has to occur on an international level. But its greater message is that peace is not the ultimate end – this is the absolute ending of warfare and violence, with peace a small step towards that. Likely an uncomfortable message at any point, but at a

time when peace itself seemed elusive it probably occasioned a sharp intake of breath in spite of an “it will come” end statement.

The War Emergency Workers National Committee organised and distributed “An appeal to women workers” in mid-1915 (Stanley, *Olive Schreiner’s The Dawn*: 94-98) This was a coordinating committee associated with the labour movement which produced a public statement about the need both to protect women’s right to work and to avoid using this to undercut trade unionism. It invited Olive Schreiner to be one of its key published signatories, in the context of her wanting to preserve the women’s movement during the war-time period by ensuring women’s issues were on the peace agenda. The draft appeal went through various changes because of the initial implication that women were taking men’s jobs, and Schreiner gave her assent to a later revision.

“Manifesto of the representative peace conference” was issued in June 1915 by the National Executive of the German Social Democratic Party [SDP] and supported by other internationalist socialist organisations (Stanley, *Olive Schreiner’s The Dawn*: 99-102). It was sent to Schreiner by Catherine Marshall, an important figure in a number of peace organisations and in this case acting on behalf of the (Quaker) Friend’s Representative Peace Conference, which was coordinating such initiatives. Its practical purpose was paramount, to express international solidarity across the warring national divisions. Olive Schreiner was invited to be one of its signatories, perhaps because she had known links with the SDP, including Karl Liebknecht the younger, coupled with her fame and known pacifist principles.

Following a meeting in the House of Commons in January 1916, which Schreiner and other notable anti-war figures attended, a “Letter from 36 sympathisers” was sent to the Editor of the *Times* in support of Sir John Simon’s opposition to the Bill to introduce



compulsory military conscription in Britain (Stanley, *Olive Schreiner's The Dawn*: 103-5). As well as being invited to the Commons meeting, Schreiner was one of the select group of signatories to the letter, with both it and the meeting probably organised by Bertrand Russell, who Schreiner had come to know well by this point. Its message is that forcing people to fight is an anathema, being both ethnically wrong and politically anti-democratic.

Schreiner's short essay "To our anti-militarists" appeared in the *Labour Leader* in March 1916 (Stanley, *Olive Schreiner's The Dawn*: 106-9). This weekly newspaper of the left originated in the Independent Labour Party and was associated with Schreiner's friend Kier Hardie, while in 1916 it was edited by Fenner Brockway, an active member of the NCF and one of her network connections. The *Leader* had taken a determinately anti-militarist position, which indicates its readership would have provided a receptive audience for Schreiner's work. The essay is addressed to men who are conscientious objectors and is part open letter and part a kind of allegory about a Christian monk, Telemachus, executed by the Romans. It proposes that people as individuals have to protest what is done in their name in the war, not leave this to others, and that standing up for one's principles is morally and politically important in itself, even if unsuccessful.

Also in March 1916, Schreiner's "Give Unto Caesar—" appeared in *War & Peace*, an anti-war publication funded by the Norman Angell Foundation (Stanley, *Olive Schreiner's The Dawn*: 110-12). Its context concerns the military tribunals which conscientious objectors appeared before and sometimes received very punitive sentences. It is possible Schreiner had a particular case in mind. Clifford Allan, a key figure in the NCF and a connection of hers, had appeared before a tribunal while she was writing her essay and just a few days before it was accepted for publication. As its title makes clear, it draws on a Christian story about Jesus, referred to in it as the world's greatest conscientious objector, to make an anti-war

point by using Christianity against itself in contradiction of the established church's support for the war.

The last of Schreiner's shorter wartime writings to appear was the allegory "Who Knocks at the Door?", published in the *Fortnightly Review* in November 1917 (Stanley, *Olive Schreiner's The Dawn*: 113-8). She described it as having been written when she was living in Hampstead in March 1915 and confined for some days because of snow.<sup>24</sup> Unlike the other shorter pieces discussed, it seems not to have been written with a particular purpose or publication outlet in mind. Schreiner observed in various letters that the only places she could publish were those for the already converted but wanted a wider audience, so this may have been a factor in its lengthy gestation period before publication. Other factors to consider here are that both its chilling content and its allegorical form may have contributed to difficulties in finding a publication outlet. Allegorical writing, fashionable and politically purposeful in the earlier period of Schreiner's writing life in the 1880s and 90s, was no longer favoured as a medium for political and ethical messages in the stark circumstances of war. This allegory's ethical message is that even people who appear calm, kind and sociable can become caught up in blood-thirsty emotions as part of a crowd when other people do so. And the form of its expression makes this very real, for it is written in real-time as an anonymous onlooker peers into a banqueting hall, and observes a frenzied massacre as it unfolds and becomes horribly attractive to those present. The reader perforce takes up the position of this onlooker and becomes in a way complicit in the terrible things happening, which is precisely Schreiner's point.

The ideas across these shorter writings fit together. Even in the midst of war, there is need to look beyond peace to the longer-term eradication of warfare as a phenomenon in human society. For this, all aspects of violence have to be eradicated, not just warfare.

Many connected changes will be required, so it is important to keep them all on the agenda and not just focus on one to the exclusion of others. While international solidarity is important and needs to be maintained, at basis individuals need to make principled decisions and take the consequences no matter what. Forcing people to fight when this is against their principles is wrong on all levels. And everybody is implicated, because the eruption of violence and killing brings to the surface base emotions and exerts a terrible fascination even among people who appear removed, and this includes women as much as men.

The context of these writings is important in understanding Olive Schreiner's place in social and political organisations and the developing trajectory of her thinking about war. As the Great War started, she was a high-profile public figure. This continued through to at least 1916 because of her fame and extensive network connections and the many invitations these occasioned. She also maintained a large social/political network, but with a prevailing silence in many relationships because of principled differences between her absolute pacifism and people who supported humanitarian involvements as well as those who more straightforwardly supported the war. This increased her dependence on connections associated with the peace movement. But Schreiner's health became progressively worse and her ability to maintain relationships contracted. Demonstrably, her writing declined from a peak in 1915 and early 1916. She also found it difficult to travel even limited distances due to ill-health. As a result, her peace movement involvements and earlier extensive network of contacts shrank. By the end of the war, she was no longer a player but an observer. However, there were gains as well as losses.

In 1918 Schreiner wrote to Jan Smuts criticising his retrograde politics. At that point Smuts was a leading member of the Imperial War Cabinet, perhaps the most influential of

the Allied military leaders, and a very high-profile political figure in South Africa as well. Her letter pokes fun of him by ironically contrasting her removed insignificance with his worldly importance in a way that reverses their respective abilities to understand events:

I know you will laugh to yourself & say, "A little old woman lying on a sofa, seeing no one & reading, fancies she sees more than we great men in the midst of affairs!" But don't you know when two clever people are playing chess, & a chance on-looker comes in he sees at a glance what the men absorbed in the game don't?<sup>25</sup>

What the old woman on the sofa was reading about was not just the Great War and its reverberations, but what she had written about warfare and violence more generally and which she continued to work on until leaving Britain for South Africa in August 1920. This is *The Dawn of Civilisation*.

**"These scattered thoughts, written at intervals"<sup>26</sup>**

*The Dawn of Civilisation* is concerned with understanding the roots of violence at a societal level, not just war, and thinking about solutions (and appears in full in Stanley, *Olive Schreiner's The Dawn: 27-85*). With *From Man to Man* and *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*, it was one of the books Olive Schreiner felt compelled to write, for the political and ethical concerns of each represented deeply-held principles and convictions. It was never completed; but although the remaining manuscripts are complicated, there is a coherence to their content once the versions now in different archival locations are taken into account. There are two sets of edited typescripts-mixed-with-handwritten-manuscripts, one longer and one shorter.<sup>27</sup> After Schreiner's death, Cronwright-Schreiner ("Introduction") published a short opening section from one of them as a magazine article. However, the

entire typescripts-mixed-with-manuscripts have now been published as a near-completed version of what Schreiner herself intended.

The sub-title refers to it as “stray thoughts” and its first-line presents it as “scattered thoughts”. This is partly a reference to content, partly to writing in a particular way, in mixing commentary with homely examples with theoretical reflection with personal statement. These are not combined, but interleaved, with the different elements used for different writerly purposes within the unfolding argument. This gives a particular flavour to how it reads and is effective in putting its ideas across. There are similarities here with Schreiner’s other wartime writings, which also layer the philosophical and political with the homely and everyday, with the direction of influence being that the initial draft of *The Dawn of Civilisation* was produced in advance of these other writings.

Olive Schreiner’s changing relationship to the contemporary peace movement has been referred to, due to her ill-health and increasing immobility, and changing fashion in how to write about important political matters. It was also related to changing her mind, and that she had developed ideas in working on *The Dawn of Civilisation* in advance of even the more radical elements of the combined peace and women’s movements, and also of her own earlier analysis in *Woman and Labour*.

In July 1914 and before the war started, as noted earlier, Schreiner identified what was then about to happen as a coming “Universal War”.<sup>28</sup> *The Dawn of Civilisation* proposes that universal war is underpinned by small as well as large violence, being animated by an animalistic blood-lust which comes to the surface in particular circumstances. What is meant by the term was not just that, although Europe-originating, the war was encompassing countries elsewhere in the world as well. It was that this was putting in place a system that was as much economic, social and ethical as it was political, and which would

persist even when a peace had been concluded. It relatedly emphasises that there could be no return to a situation pre-war where total mobilisation and an economy linked to this had not existed. Perhaps only Emile Dillon, John Maynard Keynes and a few others thought in this way, and they did so at the war's end (Stanley, *Olive Schreiner's The Dawn*: 24). It is remarkable that Schreiner did so at the point it started, and this motivated her wider more analytical concerns in *The Dawn of Civilisation* with pinpointing causes and identifying solutions, starting with the small and everyday – like two small boys scrapping over something found in the street, an example she discusses.

Olive Schreiner was an absolute pacifist, although the term does not fully express her position and needs expanding on. Pacifism indicates opposition to militarism, which she certainly did oppose; but it contrasts to war, rather than a wider set of violence on a spectrum from humdrum things at one end and universal war at the other. What her eye was on were the conditions in which violence could exist in human society. *The Dawn of Civilisation* proposes that a new way of life, indeed a new way of being, is necessary for ending violence, because it is such a deep-seated aspect of human nature. From this came her advocacy of a stance in which even tacit support for war and violence and anything that contributed to its continuation was to be withdrawn. This analysis cut across the platforms of friends Mohandas Gandhi and Solomon Plaatje, with Gandhi offering humanitarian support in the shape of ambulance and first aid teams and Plaatje concerning work battalions.<sup>29</sup> It was in conflict with the approaches of close friends like Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter, with both viewing the war as a regrettable necessity because of German provocation. It also put her at odds with feminist friends such as Emily Hobhouse who supported humanitarian involvement as well as nieces Dot and Ursula who took up

front-line nursing. And a reminder here that this total withdrawal from anything contributing to war was far in advance of most of the peace movement of the day.

For Schreiner, the end of war did not come with the cessation of the Great War, for it had brought about changes too great in economic, political and social life to be ended with the laying down of arms and signing of peace treaties. The aftermaths continued reverberating, for she recognised that deep-seated structural factors remained in place and would eventuate in a future even greater conflagration out of the ashes of the earlier, seeing a war economy playing out in the post-Great War period. Her ability to trace out the reverberating consequences of past and present events on future circumstances is quite exceptional, and she had done something similar in the aftermath of the South African War. It is no coincidence that she found John Maynard Keynes the most prescient commentator on the Great War and peace terms.<sup>30</sup> And ideas about a war economy, crucial for her, did not become current until towards the end of World War Two when, for instance, the term was used by US President Roosevelt.

*Woman and Labour* had appealed to many feminists because of its views about war as much as its message about productive labour. As noted earlier, it sees war as a male phenomenon brought about because men were largely cut off from social caring, with the envisaged solution their full involvement in it. Its analysis rests on a binary gender order rooted in women's childbearing capacities reinforced by differences in caring responsibilities. However, between that book and *The Dawn of Civilisation* a considerable change in Schreiner's thinking had occurred, touched on in her "4 thousand years" letter to Dot discussed earlier.<sup>31</sup>

*The Dawn of Civilisation* emphasises something very different, that the urge to violence is shared by women and men, although within the prevailing social order taking

binary gendered forms. While at that time women were not combatants, it sees bloodthirsty urges lurking in even the most ultra-conventional women, including harassing men seen as shirking their military duty and being sexually aroused by militarism. *The Dawn of Civilisation* provides multiple examples in building its arguments, including first seeing men as more prone to fighting and violence, then conjecturing that women are different, then saying not really different once gendered aspects are taken into account. How discomfoting this would have been had it been published at the time, for many in the women's movement subscribed to the view that women led the way in eradicating war because they had been influenced or reinforced in this by *Woman and Labour*.

### **In Conclusion**

What do these different sources add up to, regarding Olive Schreiner's position in relation to social and political thought on war and violence over the Great War period and its aftermath? They act rather like facets of a cut diamond in connecting and reflecting each other, particularly when added to by the rest of Schreiner's letters, for these provide additional information about her developing ideas and circumstances and her extensive connections in the peace and feminist movements of the day. Beyond this, what shines through is that, as an old woman lying on her sofa reading and thinking, because of her South African and Great War experiences and thinking hard about these she had been led to a new conviction, that the aspects of human nature concerned with violence, conquest and killing were intractable and would be changed only in the far future.

This is the thread binding together Schreiner's ideas and arguments in *The Dawn of Civilisation*, with her shorter wartime writings, with her breaking the silence in letters to Dot Schreiner. There are aspects of this where her thinking is in clear advance of contemporary



social and political movements and their ideas about war and peace and continue so. What she proposes about universal war, absolute disavowal of everything supporting violence, the structural embeddedness of a war economy, a future far worse conflagration to come, the deep-seated intractable animalistic aspects of human nature, women being as much implicated as men, all remain distinctive a century on, when that predicted conflagration – now known as World War Two – had indeed come about.

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### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> These letters are being prepared in transcription as part of the *Olive Schreiner Letters Online*. My grateful thanks to Lyndall Gregg's heirs for permissions.

<sup>2</sup> See *Dramatis Personae* entries at *Olive Schreiner Letters Online* [OSLO].

<sup>3</sup> To Lyndall Schreiner, 14 November 1912, private collection.

<sup>4</sup> To Wynnie Hemming, 13 June 1918, OSLO. Sometimes referred to as World War One, Great War better describes the fact that it did not affect many parts of the world in a close way, while also conveying that for those who experienced it first-hand it was cataclysmic in its effects.

<sup>5</sup> To Lyndall Schreiner, Tuesday, nd but 1916, private collection.

<sup>6</sup> Women's Royal Navy Service. Lyndall Frances Gregg nee Schreiner, b. 7 November 1887; d. 1960. While a student at Newnham College Cambridge she was involved in the UK women's

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suffrage movement; she was secretary of the Women's Enfranchisement League in Cape Town at a crucial point in its history in race terms; and later wrote about her experiences of nursing in World War I, published semi-anonymously as Lyndall, *Hospital Sketches*.

<sup>7</sup> To Mary Drew, 5 December 1913, *OSLO*.

<sup>8</sup> To John Hodgson, February and June 1915, *OSLO*.

<sup>9</sup> To Lyndall Schreiner, 21 April 1912, private collection.

<sup>10</sup> To Lyndall Schreiner, 14 November 1912, private collection.

<sup>11</sup> To Lyndall Schreiner, nd 1914, private collection.

<sup>12</sup> To Lyndall Schreiner, 1 July 1914, private collection.

<sup>13</sup> To Lyndall Schreiner, Sunday, early 1916, private collection.

<sup>14</sup> To Lyndall Schreiner, Thursday nd, private collection.

<sup>15</sup> To Lyndall Gregg nee Schreiner, nd, later 1919, private collection.

<sup>16</sup> To Lyndall Gregg nee Schreiner, 22 January 1920, private collection.

<sup>17</sup> To Lyndall Gregg nee Schreiner, 22 January 1920, private collection. Misspelling in the original.

<sup>18</sup> To EB Lloyd, March 1916, *OSLO*.

<sup>19</sup> From the opening of Schreiner's 'Who Knocks at the Door?' in Stanley, *Olive Schreiner's The Dawn*: 114.

<sup>20</sup> To Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, December 1914, *OSLO*.

<sup>21</sup> See *Dramatis Personae* entries at *Olive Schreiner Letters Online*.

<sup>22</sup> See *Dramatis Personae* entries at *Olive Schreiner Letters Online*.

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<sup>23</sup> For details of original publication, see Stanley, *Olive Schreiner's The Dawn*.

<sup>24</sup> To Jan Smuts, nd 1918, *OSLO*.

<sup>25</sup> To Jan Smuts, nd Monday 1918, *OSLO*.

<sup>26</sup> Stanley, *Olive Schreiner's The Dawn*, 37; from the first sentence.

<sup>27</sup> For details of the extant manuscripts and typescripts, see Stanley, *Olive Schreiner's The Dawn*, 27-36.

<sup>28</sup> To Lyndall Schreiner, 1 July 1914, private collection.

<sup>29</sup> See Dramatis Personae entries at *Olive Schreiner Letters Online*.

<sup>30</sup> To Jessie Rose Innes, 1 January 1920, *OSLO*.

<sup>31</sup> To Lyndall Schreiner, Thursday nd, private collection.

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